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As the title suggests, H.R. 5602 allows the United States and Socialist Republic of Vietnam to enter into permanent normal trade relations (PNTR). This would be an extension of the existing bilateral trade agreement (BTA) between the two countries enacted in 2001. On November 7, 2006, the World Trade Organization (WTO) General Council approved Vietnam's accession package for its WTO membership. Vietnam's WTO membership is expected in December, shortly after the Vietnamese National Assembly approves the accession package. Although PNTR is not a requirement for WTO membership, it would allow the U.S. to trade with Vietnam on the same multilateral level as other WTO members that have similar PNTRs.

I have long been concerned about the human rights violations that the government of Vietnam has repeatedly condoned. In fact, just recently Mr. Cong Thanh Do, a U.S. citizen and fellow resident of San Jose, California, was wrongfully imprisoned while visiting his native Vietnam. Without being formally charged of any wrongdoing, Mr. Do was held for over a month. While in the United States, Mr. Do had published essays on the internet promoting the peaceful reform of Vietnam to democracy, the release of political prisoners and basic human rights of freedom of religion and expression. While I actively supported efforts for Mr. Do's safe return to the United States, there are still many others, including U.S. citizens, detained in Vietnam for nothing more than expressing free speech. These basic human rights that we in the United States enjoy, are denied to the people of Vietnam by their government.

In large part, my concerns for human rights compelled my support for H.R. 5602 and its potential impact on Vietnam's domestic policies. I believe the rule-based mechanisms of the WTO will affect economic change and continue reform in Vietnam. Transparency in trade policies will lead to a more open and accountable Vietnamese government. The principle of rule of law cannot be easily ignored in dispute proceedings. As trade increases, global influences positively impact Vietnam's society and in due time break the dominance of the one-party government. Indeed, I believe the increased transparency and better relations that H.R. 5602 can promote with Vietnam will empower its citizens with new and expanded freedoms. For these reasons, I voted for H.R. 5602 and, barring any changes to the legislation, will support it again if reintroduced in the House of Representatives.